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SUBJECT: YEMEN: PRM VISIT UNVEILS GROWING RESENTMENT
TOWARDS REFUGEES, ACCESS ISSUES, AND DIVIDED ATTENTION

REF: A. SANAA 1287
[1B.](#) SANAA 1633

Classified By: Classified by Ambassador Stephen A. Seche for reasons 1.
4 (b) and (d)

Summary

[¶](#)1. (C) In an October 4-5 PRM visit to Yemen, a series of meetings with NGOs and international organizations (IOs) elucidated several challenges: a growing resentment toward refugees on the part of the ROYG and general population, severely limited access to Ethiopian detainees, increasing numbers of arrivals and divided international attention as a result of the Sa'ada conflict. Despite these obstacles, the ROYG has begun to take political steps in the right direction. As the refugee situation has the potential to further destabilize Yemen, the USG should act now to solidify gains from a renewed political willingness in the ROYG. End Summary.

Growing Resentment

[¶](#)2. (SBU) In a series of meetings between REFCOORD Inga Heemink from Embassy Addis Ababa and PRM/AFR Officer Janet Deutsch and various NGOs and IOs, a clear consensus emerged that resentment towards refugees in Yemen, both among ROYG officials and the general populace, was growing. Yemen is the poorest country in the Middle East, yet grants prima facie status to all Somali arrivals. With numbers nearing 600,000 (REF A), average Yemenis and the ROYG are beginning to feel the strain. Economically speaking, it is debatable as to whether or not Somalis are actually displacing Yemenis from job opportunities, but even the perception has caused real frustration. Moreover, unlike most refugees in East Africa, Somalis in Yemen reside largely in the urban centers and are therefore a more visible population.

[¶](#)3. (SBU) On a local level, resentment is most notable outside the Kharaz refugee camp in Lahj governorate. There are seven impoverished villages surrounding the camp in which tensions are steadily rising. NGOs such as ADRA and Save the Children as well as UNHCR note growing incidents of harassment and

vehicle hijackings over the last year. Representatives from these organizations readily admit to the legitimacy of many of these grievances and continue to work on projects to mitigate conflict between the villages and refugee community. Local villagers maintain access to the refugee hospitals and are regularly included in social events in the camps. There remains, however, a large disparity in the quality of schools and level of assistance received by the camp in contrast to the local community. This basic conflict epitomizes the sentiments of Yemenis around the country according to several interlocutors.

¶4. (C) On a governmental level, several contacts indicated that the ROYG is beginning to tire of the refugees. According to Gareth Richards, country director of CARE, &the ROYG does absolutely nothing⁸ to help refugees and leaves the work to IOs and NGOs. Stefano Tamagnini, country director of the International Organization for Migration (IOM), noted that refugees are increasingly becoming a &burden for the government.⁸ Facing growing resentment in the south, an armed conflict in the north, continuing threats from al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, and a host of economic problems, it seems that the ROYG does not have the time or energy to deal with its African refugee population. Senior UNHCR officer Samer Haddadin cited contacts at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) as stating that Yemen's signing of the 1951 refugee convention and 1967 protocol was &a mistake.⁸

Access to Ethiopians

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¶5. (SBU) Ethiopian migrants constitute the vast majority of the most vulnerable arrivals to Yemen as they lack the immediate legal recognition that Somalis receive. According to UNHCR statistics, most Ethiopians arriving in Yemen do not apply for asylum or seek refugee status. UNHCR has logged only about 900 asylum seekers out of 18,000 plus arrivals this year. These numbers indicate that Ethiopians arriving in Yemen are in fact largely economic migrants. UNHCR is unable to estimate how many of this year's arrivals have been detained and deported, but notes that approximately 6,000 Ethiopians are currently being detained in Yemen. Moreover, many arrivals are never counted, as they are detained and deported before they can report to UNHCR to receive the 10-day pass that allows them an opportunity to seek asylum (REF B).

¶6. (C) Despite the low percentage of asylum seekers, access to detainees remains critical. UNHCR's Haddadin said, "If there are 1,000 arrivals and 999 are economic migrants, we still need access to the lone asylum seeker." Because access is so restricted, it is impossible to determine how many arrivals would have sought asylum if granted the opportunity. At the moment UNHCR essentially has ad hoc access to non-Somali detainees due to rare and sporadic permissions from the ROYG. Tamagnini, however, remains cautiously confident that after over two years of lobbying, IOM and UNHCR will soon be granted unfettered access to detainees. (Note: Tamagnini was the sole interlocutor optimistic in this regard. End Note.)

Hope on the Political Horizon

¶7. (C) After long neglecting last year's draft refugee legislation, it appears that the ROYG is offering some political hope for refugees in Yemen. While the legislation itself has gained no momentum in Parliament, two other important issues have. First, according to UNHCR, President Saleh recently issued a decree stipulating improvements to the National Committee on Refugee Affairs (NCRA). Possible reforms under discussion by current members are inclusion of UNHCR on the committee, establishment of a nationalized asylum system, and a government-sponsored Refugee Status

Determination (RSD) unit. While UNHCR does not believe that these reforms will be finalized in the near future, Haddadin claims that a more important change is likely to occur before the end of this year. The ROYG has allegedly expressed willingness to move forward in taking a more substantial role in refugee registration centers by inaugurating a national stamp or &slip8 that will further legitimize the documentation issued by UNHCR. According to Haddadin, this is perhaps the most important development to date, since it will further protect refugees and asylum seekers from detention. UNHCR notes that there have been too many incidents of local officials refusing to recognize UNHCR-issued documents.

Divided Attentions and Limited Resources

¶8. (C) As the Houthi insurrection and ROYG aerial campaign continue to rage in Yemen's northern governorate of Sa'ada, NGOs and IOs alike are increasingly straining to provide much-needed emergency relief to displaced populations in the surrounding areas. Unfortunately, resources and access are limited and the funding and man-hours used to respond to the conflict have detracted from other refugee issues. There are potential long-term consequences to the international community's increasingly divided attention. The refugee situation is growing in scope: increasing numbers of arrivals from the Horn of Africa and rising frustrations among the Yemeni population translate into a more volatile situation in many parts of the country. With the fighting in Sa'ada showing no signs of abatement, it appears that relief organizations will continue to struggle to meet the needs of both displaced Yemenis and refugee populations.

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Comment

¶9. (C) The refugee situation in Yemen requires consistent attention from the international community in order to remain stable. With the ROYG apparently willing to take steps in the right direction, now is the time to engage and increase USG support politically for the ROYG and financially for IOs and NGOs that deal with refugee affairs. As long as the war in Sa'ada continues, however, it seems that refugee issues will continue to take a back seat to the problem of Yemen's rapidly growing IDP population. End Comment.
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